

coagulant drugs with herbal medicines should be publicised further," says the report.

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Vitamin cartel companies given record fines

The European Commission has imposed record fines of 855.22 million euros (£534m; \$753m) on eight pharmaceutical companies for operating secret market sharing and price fixing cartels in the supply of vitamins throughout the 1990s.

The heaviest penalty of 462 million euros was handed out to the Swiss based multinational Hoffman-La Roche. The investigators maintain that the company was the chief instigator and was involved in all 12 cartels that they uncovered. Hoffmann-La Roche is the largest vitamin producer in the world, with about half of the overall market share.

The German company BASF, which is second in size only to Hoffman-La Roche, was accused of following its lead and was handed a penalty of 296.1 million euros. Lower fines were imposed on three Japanese manufacturers and on a further trio of European companies—Merck KgaA (Germany), Solvay Pharmaceuticals BV (Netherlands), and Aventis SA (France). As Aventis was the first to cooperate with the investigation and had supplied decisive evidence, its penalty was considerably reduced.

Rory Watson *Brussels*

Commission asked to investigate racist discrimination against doctors

A UK politician has asked the Commission for Racial Equality to investigate whether some doctors working for the NHS experience racial discrimination by being denied progression to consultant status.

Dr Evan Harris, the health spokesman for the Liberal Democrat party, last week wrote to the Commission for Racial Equality, the statutory body

responsible for enforcing the Race Relations Act, asking it to examine whether doctors from ethnic minorities were being treated unfairly in the limitations on their career progression.

He asked the commission to look specifically at the situation of doctors working in non-consultant career grade posts, over 60% of which are held by doctors from ethnic minorities.

One of the stumbling blocks preventing doctors who have trained outside the United Kingdom from becoming consultants has been the European Specialist Medical Qualifications Order 1995. This has resulted in many doctors being unable to obtain a Certificate of Completion of Specialist Training—a prerequisite for being employed as a consultant.

Alan Milburn, the health secretary, told the BBC last week that he was considering changes in the law so that medical qualifications gained overseas could count towards completion of UK training for doctors.

Susan Mayor *London*

Spain opts to fuel health funds with petrol tax

The Spanish government voted last week for an extra tax on petrol to finance the state health service. Germany, Austria, and Italy already have a similar tax in place.

The tax, due to come into effect on 1 January 2002, will mean that 4 pesetas (1p; 2 cents) per litre of petrol or diesel will be collected by the government to put into health funds. Regional communities with responsibilities for health-care provision will be able to apply a variable tax up to a further 4 pesetas until 2004, which can also be devoted to environmental projects. The new tax will raise 136 billion pesetas (£500m; \$720m) a year, said Estanislao Rodríguez-Ponga, state secretary at the treasury.

The health minister, Celia Villalobos, told Spain's parliament that for the country's health system to remain one of the world's best it will need more funds.

Xavier Bosch *Barcelona*

AIDS now fourth biggest killer worldwide, report says

Alex Vass *BMJ*

A joint report by the World Health Organization and the United Nations, published this week to coincide with world AIDS day, concludes that AIDS is the leading cause of death in sub-Saharan Africa and the fourth biggest killer worldwide.

Since the epidemic began 20 years ago, 60 million people worldwide have been infected with the virus, and currently 40 million people live with HIV.

The report warns that rates of infection are rising fastest in eastern Europe and Russia. In 2001 there were an estimated 250 000 new infections in the region. Russia has seen a 15-fold increase in infections over the past three years. Most of these cases are related to injecting drug use.

Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be the worst affected area. The report says that AIDS killed 2.3 million people in 2001 and that there were 3.4 million new HIV infections. The region is the only one where more women than men are infected by the virus. More than 28 million people in the region currently live with HIV, a prevalence of 8%. Most of these people, the report says, do not know they have the virus.

The epidemic also "threatens human welfare, developmental progress, and social stability on an unprecedented scale." Hardest hit countries could lose 20% of their gross domestic product by 2020.

Steep drops in life expectancies are now beginning to occur. If it were not for HIV and AIDS, the average life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa would be 62 years; it currently stands at 47 years.

The report says that marked increases in rates of infection in Asia and the Pacific, which have some of the world's most populous countries, are also of "particular concern." Reported HIV infections in China rose by 67% in the first six months of 2001, compared with the previous year. India has a prevalence of about 1%, representing an estimated 3.86 million people.

Some progress is being made. In Cambodia and Thailand large scale prevention programmes have held the epidemic "at bay."

● The United Kingdom's two leading AIDS charities are marking world AIDS day by launching campaigns against the stigma and discrimination shown towards those living with HIV infection and AIDS.

The Terrence Higgins Trust has released a report showing that one in five people with HIV say they have faced prejudice while the National AIDS Trust has launched a new media campaign called "Are you HIV prejudiced?" □

AIDS Epidemic Update is accessible at www.unaids.org/worldaidsday/2001

